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Title: The Watcher (part 1)

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"You!"

Dasha tried to rise but her trembling limbs pierced her with pain. The shadow of the figure cast down over her as it approached slowly. She scrambled on the ground to get herself upright again although she wasn't sure if she had a chance of even keeping her balance. She quickly attempted to cast another healing spell on herself.

Her head spun and her vision blurred from the effort but through the confusion she could see a faint light spread out from her hand and wash over her body. The effect was nearly unnoticeable but a small pulse of strength worked its way through her legs and arms. Pushing away from the ground she managed to spring up to a shaky standing position just as the figure grew close and stopped only an arms length away.

"I won't let you... you almost destroyed..." she said between short breaths, her knees buckling. As she fell forward two gray hands caught her shoulders.

"No... I won't allow..." Her vision was filled with dancing points of light and she could feel the last of her strength

vanishing like fog in the morning sunlight. The last thing she saw was the face of Adranath, tears streaming down his face.

"The wait has ended," he said, holding Dasha close like a child. His tears flowed faster and he began to sob. "You have returned to us... at long last, you have finally returned to us!"

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A twinkling of firelight made orange flowers bloom behind Dasha's closed eyes. She squinted and rubbed her temples and slowly cracked her eyes open. On the other side of the small campfire she could see Adranath sitting across from her, staring at her with a gentle smile. She sat upright quickly and tensed.

"What have you done? Where am I?!" She demanded. She was finished showing the eternal respect after the chaos she had witnessed transpire at his command. The image of his spells smashing through the landscape of Ilshenar during the battle would haunt her dreams for a lifetime.

"I worried for you, young one. It took days for your strength to return." Adranath said as if not hearing her. "We will be complete again. We must be on our way soon, the wait has been so long." He smiled and stared at her.

Dasha sat silent for a

moment, trying to make sense of his words. She wasn't sure if the eternal was insane or trying to manipulate her. Tell me what you have done, Adranath! To what consequence has your madness condemned us? Where are we?" She tried to find some sign of understanding in his eyes but they seemed vacant, as if he were in a dream.

"The mountains, Dasha. Do you not recognize the mountains? Have they changed so much after all this time?" He stood and looked around the majestic landscape. "All this time..."

"I have never seen this place before." She spoke slowly, unsure of her own words. This place did look familiar. "This land... it reminds me of home. But this is some mockery of our world. A poor imitation!" She stood and walked to stand in front of him. Her hand held his shoulder tightly and his gaze met hers. "Tell me what has happened here! Where is our homeland? How did you bring the Juka..."

"The Juka!" His eyes widened and he grasped her hand. "The time has come, Dasha. I have been watching for so long and the time has come again. Our chance to restore the balance begins anew!" The balance?" Her heart softened slightly at his words. "Only days ago your thirst for vengeance consumed you, now you again find hope for the balance?"

"Days?" His face wrinkled in confusion. "I have had... centuries... you do not know! My child... you do not know... gone for countless centuries. The destruction averted... sit, child. Sit." He took her hand and led her back to the fire. "You must be told."

She slowly lowered to the ground and relaxed. The eternal's behavior concerned her deeply. "What must I be told?" "You have been lost, Dasha. You were taken from time. You and the entire Juka fortress, all taken in an instant. Pulled from history! It was Exodus!"

"But I saw you from the fortress... you were casting your spells and then everything was lost in light." Her memory strained to recall the event fully from the madness that had transpired around her.

Exodus! Do something to give us time, sorcerer! The insanity of Adranath's explanation suddenly began to make a cold sense to her. This was home. The mountains had dulled over time and the landscape had shifted. New, strange plant life flourished where fire and explosions of magic had been days before. But... it was more than days, wasn't it?

"How long?" Dasha crossed her arms and felt a chill in her body. Her world was now gone, the magics once controlled by her people had faded and changed. No wonder her spells felt weak. Her

home was now hopelessly lost in history. "How long have I truly been away?" Thousands of years... so very... very long..." He stared into space as if reliving every moment of the wait. "For so long I have been watching... and now the time has come."

"You have... you could not have been waiting for this long! How?!"

"You forget the very nature of an eternal, child?" Adranath smiled gently. "I became the watcher. The responsibility was mine. I... I had to atone for... what I had done..." His smile faded into dread. "Such madness... was I really so foolish, Dasha?"

"Please... Adranath..." She held him gently by the shoulders and spoke in soft tones, "where are the Meer? Surely our race did not allow oblivion to take us? What happened after I... after I was gone?"

"The dreams came." A tear rolled from his eye.

"Such destruction I caused... everything was gone. The Juka, the fortress, the Meer... we dreamt of our end, yet... we were spared from it. In the dreams I... I killed everyone. Everyone dead because of my sickening vengeance!" He calmed himself, remembering the carnage had been reduced to a displaced memory.

"That was when we knew. We knew what Exodus had done. The Juka, stolen away in time to keep the balance tilted! You... stolen away."